

EXTRUSION METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR CERAMIC HONEYCOMB ARTICLES

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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This invention relates to an improvement in a method for extruding ceramic honeycomb articles, in particular ultra-thinwall ceramic honeycomb articles having 4 mil cell walls or less, and an apparatus for carrying out the same.

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Twin screw extruders are commonly employed in the manufacturing of ceramic honeycomb articles. US Pat. No. 4,551,295, herein incorporated by reference in its entirety, is directed at a method of using a twin screw extruder to produce cordierite or cordierite-mullite honeycomb cellular substrates for employment as catalytic converters in automotive engines.

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In an effort to meet the demands of ever tighter emission standards, automobile manufacturers are requiring honeycomb cellular substrates with thinner cell walls to provide increased geometric surface area and faster light-off properties.

A problem which presently exists in the manufacturing of ultra-thinwall honeycomb cellular substrates having 4 mil cell walls or less is die plugging. Die plugging leads to missing webs and non-knitting webs in the substrates thus rendering them unusable and resulting in high production losses. It is

believed that large particles and/or contaminants pass through the twin screw extruder screen, enter the die and plug the die slots.

Finer screens may be used to filter out the majority of particles and/or contaminants which would otherwise lead to die plugging. This solution, however, is not ideal because finer screens more readily blind or plug-up and as such cause instability in the extrusion process which is created when the profile of the screen is changed. Plugged screens induce process and production losses. Further the pressures created in a twin screw extruder having a fine screen coupled to or immediately upstream from the die often exceed the pressure limitation of the apparatus causing system failure.

Therefore, it would be advantageous to eliminate the aforementioned problems of die plugging and process instability in the manufacturing of ultra-thinwall honeycomb cellular substrates having a wall thickness of 4 mill or less.

As such, it is an object of the present invention to provide an improvement in a process for making ceramic honeycomb articles, and in particular in a process for making ceramic ultra-thinwall honeycomb articles having 4 mil cell walls or less, without the aforementioned problems.

Prior Art

US Pat. No. 2,336,734 (Jellinek) discloses an extrusion process which involves a preliminary extrusion step to plasticize the batch before final extrusion. Either the entire batch or some portion of the batch is first pre-worked to a desired plasticity in a single screw extruder, formed into strands and then subsequently re-extruded into a final article in another single screw extruder.

US Pat. No. 3,390,216 (Umeya et al.) discloses an extrusion process for ceramic materials which involves pre-shaping a batch in an auger extruder, immediately thereafter passing the batch through a vacuum chamber for degassing, and then subsequently extruding to a final article through a piston extruder while at the same time maintaining the batch in a degassed state.

US Pat. No. 3,745,200 (Geyer) discloses an extrusion process for thermoplastic materials which involves two worm-type extruders. One extruder is used in the conventional way, with the second extruder being employed to receive and regenerate portions of the batch from the conventional extruder back into the conventional extruder at regular intervals.

US Pat. No. 3,888,963 (Orso et al.) discloses a discontinuous extrusion process in which a homogenizing assembly is used to break up and homogenize interfaces between adjacent charges of batch material.

US Pat. No. 5,213,737 (Ford et al.) discloses an extrusion process for powdered materials which involves having one or more gear pumps in succession between the extruder and the die. In one embodiment, the batch is pre-worked in a twin screw extruder and then transferred to a single screw extruder for being fed to the gear pumps and for final forming.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, there is provided an improvement in a process of making honeycomb articles, which process utilizes a co-rotating, intermeshing twin screw extrusion apparatus to mix, screen, and extrude a batch of ceramic materials through a die, the improvement which comprises the steps of separating the mixing and screening phase from the extrusion phase, by passing the batch through a first co-rotating, intermeshing twin screw extruder or a mixer extruder to mix and screen the batch, and then directly passing the mixed and screened batch through a second co-rotating, intermeshing twin screw extruder or a pumping extruder to transport and force the batch through a die assembly to produce a honeycomb article.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, there is provided an apparatus for extruding a ceramic honeycomb article comprising a first co-rotating, intermeshing twin screw extruder or a mixer extruder for mixing and screening a batch of ceramic material, the first twin screw extrusion apparatus comprising a first feed inlet at one end, a first discharge outlet at the other end,

and a filtering screen detachably mounted adjacent the first discharge outlet; a second co-rotating, intermeshing twin screw extruder or a pumping extruder downstream from the mixer extruder for transporting and forcing the batch through a die assembly, the pumping extruder comprising a second feed inlet at one end corresponding to the first discharge outlet of the first twin screw extruder and a second discharge outlet at the other end; means for linking the mixer extruder to the pumping extruder; and, a die assembly attached to the second discharge outlet of the pumping extruder for producing a honeycomb article.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a top view of an apparatus embodying the teachings of the present invention.

FIG. 2 shows the first twin screw extruder in cross-section and the second twin screw extruder in elevation.

FIG. 3 shows the first twin-screw extruder in elevation and the second twin screw extruder in cross-section.

FIG. 4 shows a perspective view of the adapter device of the apparatus of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENT INVENTION

The present invention provides an improvement in a process of making ceramic honeycomb articles, the method being providing a ceramic material in the form of a batch and passing the batch through a twin screw extrusion apparatus to mix, screen, de-air, convey and force the batch through a die assembly. The improvement lies in uncoupling the mixing and screening phase from the extrusion phase. This is achieved by passing the batch through a first twin screw extrusion apparatus or a mixer extruder which is used for the mixing and screening of the batch, subsequently followed by a transfer of the batch to

a second twin screw extrusion apparatus or a pumping extruder which is used to extrude the batch through a die assembly.

The terms "extrusion phase" or "extrude" as used herein mean the conveying or transporting of the batch through the barrel of the extruder, and forcing of the batch through the die assembly.

The term "batch" as used herein means a wet mixture of dry ceramic raw materials, such as clay, talc, alumina and mullite, a binder/plasticizer, such as polyvinyl alcohol, and/or water. Typically in a batch there are between about 50-75 % by weight dry ingredients and between about 25-50 % by weight wet ingredients. The batch when reacted forms a ceramic material such as carbides, or refractory oxides. Preferably, the batch when reacted forms cordierite ($2\text{MgO} \cdot 2\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \cdot 5\text{SiO}_2$).

Referring now to FIGS. 1, 2 and 3 shown at 10 is an apparatus embodying the present invention. Once the desired batch is made up, it is fed into first twin screw extruder 12 through a device such as hopper 14, positioned at first feed inlet 16, where it is picked up by screws 18 in barrel 20. The screws can be co-rotating or counter-rotating, intermeshing or non-meshing. Preferably, the screws are co-rotating, intermeshing, self-cleaning screws.

The first twin screw extruder 12 functions to mix and screen the batch. More specifically screws 18 act to mix, shear and plasticize the batch. Concurrently, the batch runs the length of barrel 20 in the direction of the arrows as shown, and passes through filtering screen 22. The pressure required to pass the batch through the filtering screen, i.e., the screening pressure depends on the screen size. The batch may be passed through the filtering screen 22 at pressures up to 5000 psi, and preferably at about 2000 psi.

Filtering screen 22 which is positioned upstream from and detachably mounted adjacent first discharge outlet 24, has a screen size with openings of between about 30 μm and 100 μm . It is the purpose of filtering screen 22 to cleanse the batch of particles and/or contaminants which would otherwise plug slots in the die resulting in defects in the honeycomb structure and ultimately product failure. When filtering screen 22 becomes plugged such that batch no

longer uniformly passes through, a new filtering screen **22A** replaces the plugged screen. The screen change may be performed in any number of ways including manually replacing a plugged screen with a new one; or automatically changing the screens with a device which contains a plurality of screens (not shown).

A vacuum, as known in the art, may be pulled on the batch while in the first twin screw extruder **12** at first vent port **15**, to de-air or remove trapped air from the batch before it enters second twin screw extruder **28**. De-airing, however, results in a stiffer batch which requires more pressure to pass through filtering screen **22**. It is contemplated, however, that excess wet ingredients, i.e., water/solvent, may be added to lower the batch viscosity in order to facilitate easier passage through filtering screen **22**. Preferably, no more than 25-50% by weight wet ingredients are added. This excess wetness can then be removed from the batch in the second twin screw extruder **28** by pulling a vacuum and/or heating the batch, as known in the art.

Following the mixing, shearing, plasticizing and screening of the batch in first twin screw extruder **12**, the batch exits first twin extruder **12** at first discharge outlet **24** and enters second twin screw extruder **28** at second feed inlet **30**.

Second twin screw extruder **28** is positioned downstream from first twin screw extruder **12**. In a preferred embodiment second twin screw extruder **28** is perpendicularly mounted in respect to first twin screw extruder **12**.

Shown at **26** are means for connecting first twin screw extruder **12** to second twin screw extruder **28**, more specifically an adapter device having a front end **25** and a back end **27**. Front end **25** is attached to first discharge outlet **24** and back end **27** is attached to second feed inlet **30**, such that first extruder **12** is connected to second extruder **28**. Adapter device **26** is a conduit, a pipe-like structure, which facilitates the feeding of the batch from first extruder **12** into second extruder **28**.

Referring now to FIG. 4, the preferred shape of adapter device **26** is shown; more specifically, adapter device **26** has a front end **25** having a front hole **25A** and a back end **27** having a back hole **27B**, such that front hole **25A**

is greater than back hole **27B**, i.e., the interior of adapter device **26** is funnel-like. In this preferred embodiment "dead-zones" in which batch passes over batch are eliminated.

5 Even though the preferred embodiment of the present invention shows adapter device **26** for connecting first extruder **12** to second extruder **28**, it is also contemplated that the connection between first extruder **12** and second extruder **28** may be attained in an alternate way, for example by directly attaching the two extruders together.

10 Once the batch enters second twin screw extruder **28** at second feed inlet **30**, it is picked up and carried by screws **32** in barrel **34**. Screws **32** act to transport the batch throughout the length of barrel **34** towards second discharge outlet **36** and ultimately die assembly **40**.

15 The second twin screw extruder **28** functions to de-air and build pressure in the batch, such that the batch is conveyed and ultimately forced through die assembly **40**. The batch is de-aired by applying a vacuum at second vent port **38**, as known in the art. The de-airing step is performed to remove trapped air and to ensure that the batch is compacted before it enters the die assembly **40**.

20 Pressure is built up in the batch to force the batch through die **40**. This pressure required to force the batch through the die, i.e., the extrusion pressure, depends on such factors as the type of material and the type of product that is to be extruded, and also on the type of die extrusion that is to be used. In the apparatus of the present invention much higher extrusion pressures may be achieved across the die assembly, when compared to prior
25 art twin screw extruders because the pressure capability of the second twin screw extruder **28** is used solely to force the batch through the die assembly **40**. Whereas, in a conventional twin screw extruder its pressure capability is used to pass the batch through the screen and to force the batch through the die. As a result, the extruder is not capable of accommodating the pressure
30 drop across both the screen and the die. Therefore, in the apparatus of the present invention where the screening/mixing step is decoupled from the extrusion step there is more control over the batch pressure across the die. In

the present process the batch may be pressurized up to about 5000 psi, and preferably at about 2500-3000 psi.

As the batch exits through second discharge outlet **36** it is forced through die assembly **40** to form honeycomb structures of any cell density and wall thickness, however, preferably ultra-thinwall honeycomb structures of 4 mil cell walls or less.

In another embodiment, before the batch enters die assembly **40** it passes through die protection screen **39**. Die-protection screen **39** is a coarse screen which acts to guard die assembly **40** against objects which could cause damage to the die, such as metal worn off the barrel or loose machine parts. Die-protection screen **39** is detachably mounted adjacent die assembly **40**, and has a coarse screen size with openings greater than 100 μm , preferably greater than 120 μm .

To more fully illustrate the invention, the following non-limiting example is presented.

Example

The process and apparatus of the present invention has been successfully utilized as presented in the following example.

The batch is made of ceramic raw materials, extrusion aids, and water such that once formed into the honeycomb shape, and fired, it will form cordierite; for example a mixture is made up of the following parts: about 41 of talc, about 15 of kaolin, about 26-27 of calcined kaolin, about 15 of alumina, about 2 of silica, about 3 of methylcellulose as binder, about 0.5 sodium stearate as wetting agent, and about 30 of water, preferably deionized water. The composition can vary somewhat depending on the desired properties, for example, rheological properties.

The materials are dry blended in a mixer such as a Littleford blender to provide a homogeneous mix. The water is then added by spraying it rapidly into the blender to disperse it uniformly. The time for addition of the water is short, to prevent the damp mixture from beginning to compact and plasticize.

At this point, the batch is in the form of a damp powder. The batch is then fed at a constant rate into the first twin screw extruder, where it is picked up by the co-rotating and intermeshing screws. The first twin screw extruder receives the batch, where it is mixed, sheared and plasticized as it moves through the barrel. A vacuum is pulled in the first twin screw extruder to de-air the batch. The batch is compacted and then passed through the filtering screen, at a pressure of about 2000 psi. As the mixture exits the filtering screen it passes through the adapter device and enters the second twin screw extruder.

A vacuum is pulled in the second twin screw extruder to de-air the batch of any air that may be introduced upon entrance to the second twin screw extruder. The second twin screw extruder also has co-rotating, intermeshing screws. The batch is transported by the screws down the barrel of the extruder, passes through the die-protection screen and then through the die.

In the second twin screw extruder pressure is built up to extrude the batch through the die, at about 2500-3000 psi. The extruded shape is that of a honeycomb cellular structure.

In laboratory experiments honeycombs with a cell density of as high as about 900 cells/in² and a cell wall thickness of as low as about 2 mill have been extruded on the apparatus of the present invention.

An advantage of the present invention is that higher pressures can be achieved across the filtering screen and the die, when compared to a single twin-screw extrusion process. Since the filtering screen is decoupled from the die assembly there is no longer a pressure drop across the filtering screen before the batch enters the die. Therefore, the pressure capability of the second twin screw extruder can be fully utilized to convey the batch and force it through the die assembly. Whereas, in the prior art where the filtering screen is positioned immediately upstream from the die, the pressure forming capability of the extruder can not accommodate the pressure drop across the filtering screen before the batch is forced through the die.

Another advantage of the present invention is a more stabilized and controlled process for continuously extruding honeycomb ceramic articles and in particular continuously extruding ultra-thinwall honeycomb ceramic articles

having cell densities of 400-2000 cell/in² and cell wall of 4 mil cell or less. The batch can be run with less water in the pumping extruder which results in a stiffer wet product. A lower viscosity batch, which is not de-aired can be passed more easily through the filtering screen, thus reducing the pressure across the screen and increasing the process stability. A blinded filtering screen can be replaced with a new one without inducing processes losses.

It is also contemplated that in the present invention an improvement in material utilization of about greater than 5% would occur over a conventional single twin screw extrusion process. Further, standard raw material batches can be utilized without the need for the development of new compositions having finer particle size distributions because plugged filtering screen changes can now be accomplished quickly and without process losses.

Although the present invention has been fully described by way of examples, it is to be noted that various changes and modifications will be apparent to those skilled in the art. Therefore, unless otherwise such changes and modifications depart from the scope of the present invention, they should be construed as included therein.